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ABSTRACT

This study examined individuals' concepts of human nature in Germany, the United States, and Indonesia. Three procedures were used with about 100 subjects in each country. Only the second procedure, a presentation of a story involving a character's dilemma that has moral and social consequences, is reported here. In each culture, there were some individuals who tried to solve the dilemma at each of several stages of understanding of human nature. The three highest stages are discussed. In Stage IIIa, individuals are conceived as autonomous identities. In Stage IIIb, identity is defined as mutual relations between persons. In Stage IV, individuals are conceived as parts of a larger system. Stages IIIb and IV are characterized by dialectical thinking. Western and Indonesian subjects exhibited differences in the way they understood these stages. Results indicated a higher proportion of individuals from Germany and the United States approached the dilemma with a Stage IV understanding than individuals from Indonesia. Indonesians showed a lower frequency of the use of dialectical thought than subjects from Germany or the United States. Eight references are cited. (BC)

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Symposion: Personality Development in Culture

Persons' Conception of Human Nature:

A Comparative Study in Germany, Indonesia and U.S.A.

Rolf Oerter

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Already in his article about the self system, Bandura (1978) emphasizes the role of conceptions of human nature underlying psychological theories. The transfer of those conceptions to other cultures leads a biased methodological approach. From a more pragmatic perspective, a precondition for applying psychological concepts and theories in different cultures is the knowledge about how development and education are conceived in a specific culture. Those conceptualizations are labeled as ethnotheories.

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Ethnotheories are world views baring belief systems of the individual (Sigel, 1985). They are given as mental representations of life experiences containing the acquisition of social knowledge provided by the culture.

According to Sigel (1991) we can speak of theories since they are self-conscious and explain outcomes of human behavior.

Ethnotheories provide knowledge about physical, psychological, social and contextual aspects of personality development.

I am going to focus now on a very broad ethnotheory, namely the concept of human nature. The ethnotheory of the concept of human nature can be understood as composed of universal (etic) and culture-specific (emic) categories. Furthermore, it is assumed that the concept of human nature shows different developmental levels ranging from simple descriptions of surface-characteristic to a more complex description using elements of a deep-structure.

The universal characteristics are assumed to form structures in the meaning of Piaget (1970) and Kohlberg (1976) that are constructed by the individual similarly in each culture, since all humans may have the same basic social and personal experience in common. The universal structures are - also in accordance with Piaget and Kohlberg - assumed to follow as a developmental sequence one after another with increasing complexity.

The question is how to identify those structures. I started with Western cultures, namely with Germany and U.S.A. Five stages were found which share some characteristics with other approaches, e.g. Livesley and Bromley (1973), Loevinger (1976), Noam (1985), and Kohlberg (1976), but are formulated more broadly. Each stage is assumed to consist of the components of subject's personality theory, social/environmental theory and

action theory. Furthermore, processes of thought are related to each stage as a necessary condition for its construction.

Method

Three procedures were used: (1) an interview about adulthood asking for values, behaviors and goals an adult should have, (2) dilemma stories followed by a guided interview, (3) a sorting procedure which presented the subject with preformulated statements corresponding to the structural levels of the concept of human nature.

Since the results to be presented below focus on the method of dilemma stories, only this method is described in more detail. The subject is presented with a story in which a contradiction is embedded. One story tells the dilemma of an actor whose company shuts down and moves to another city. The actor can either commute, thus losing time for his/her family, or stay and lose the job, thus risking unemployment. Furthermore, the actor has bought a house and must pay a high mortgage. The subject is asked to describe the situation and to find a solution. The interviewer is asking questions and tries to reach the highest possible level the subject can achieve.

The second story deals with two old school buddies who meet after a long time, telling each other about their way of life. One of them has become a banker working hard all day and dedicating even his/her free time to career. The other one has taken over the dog-breeding business of his/her parents and is happy and satisfied with what he/she is doing. Both defend their

own life-style but soon question whether their way of life is the best one.

In Indonesia only the second dilemma was used and adapted to Javanese culture. The dog breeder became a teacher who lives in a village with his/her parents helping them with farming and participating in community life. The role of the banker remained unchanged.

Subjects were about 100 males and females in each culture ranging from age 18 to 25. In Germany and Indonesia the sample was composed from from low educated and high educated (College, University) subjects. In the U. S. only high educated subjects were investigated thus far. Therefore, the comparison of the three cultures was only carried out with comparable sub-samples.

Some results

Description of the three highest stages

Stage IIIa is characterized by the autonomous identity forming the core of internal psychological entities and organizing them for a meaningful life-style. Since this identity is attributed to all persons, everybody has the right to be different from others. Consequently, relativistic thinking is used in order to justify the existence of different and even contradicting value-systems and life-styles. In the individual's action theory,

consequences of one's action become the most important part of action. Therefore, everybody is responsible for consequences of his/her own actions.

This description is true for Western subjects as well as Indonesian subjects. However, while Western subjects interpret autonomy primarily as pushing through personal goals and expressing internal desires, Indonesians emphasize the control of one's own egoistic desires and emotions in favour of the wellbeing of the group to which one belongs (family, community). This means also resistance to temptation.

At stage IIIb human beings are conceived as mutual (reciprocal) identities. Identity is defined by enduring mutual relations between persons. Since persons vary with regard to values and goals, any sort of identification other persons leads to inner conflicts. The individual discovers that human beings struggle with contradicting tendencies with regard to the ideal self, e.g. life-style, values. To handle those contradictions dialectical thinking is needed.

While Western subjects primarily deal with conflicting action tendencies and goals within one and the same person, Indonesians perceive the conflict between personal desires and the well-being of the group to which the individual belongs. A dialectical solution in Indonesia is, for example, to recognize the needs and desires of others, to feel empathically with them and to renounce one's own goals.

For instance, one subject reports that he wants to become an engineer, but his parents wish him to become a physician. He describes that he lived in a conflict for a long time but then recognized the feelings of his parents if he would not fulfill their desire and he decided to change his mind. Western subject at this stage also would describe their empathy with their parents but insist on their own occupational goal. The Indonesian solution seems unbalanced to most of us, but must be evaluated under the concept of the Indonesian understanding of maturity which means control of one's own 'egoistic' desires and goals. Indonesians would perceive the Western solution as unbalanced because of its 'egoistic' bias.

A similar dialectical process is performed by Indonesian subjects with the dilemma story. The conflict between both life-styles, that of the teacher in the village and that of the banker, is mainly perceived as one between enhancement of personal competences and social responsibility. Therefore, they propose as a solution the improvement of the individual's capabilities and competences which then should be used for collective, social demands. "I mean if a person has reached a higher level of knowledge he should use it for those who need it."

At stage IV, human beings are perceived as elements or parts of a big system which has its own rules of functioning. The individual is conceived in polarity to the society. Individual

desires and demands of culture and society have to be reconciled.

Western subjects who have reached this stage complain the failure of society in establishing equality, human rights and wealth for all members of the nation or world community. They focus on objective dialectics, i.e. objectively existing contradiction independent from a single person.

Indonesian subjects, however, emphasize at level IV harmony between individual, society and nature. The main goal is to maintain or to achieve harmony in a system in which each element, particularly each person, has to fulfill a given task.

From the Indonesian perspective, the individual feels satisfied if he/she can contribute to the functioning of society. Individual and societal welfare go together. Nevertheless, contradictions between individual and society are recognized and treated by dialectical processes. One Indonesian subject, for example, states: "...it is a general human problem because every individual has his/her own desires...Sometimes that what the individual wants does not fit for what is requested by society...I would guide those individuals who have their own will in such a way that they could get what they want without causing conflicts with societal rules.

Responsibility as an example of an emic category

Results can be analyzed along categories which are often used in

a specific culture. In the following, the concept of responsibility is described for Indonesian subjects. Although responsibility is a well-known concept in Western cultures, too, Indonesian subjects use it more frequently and more as a core concept for understanding human beings.

Responsibility is a central norm in Indonesian society and therefore also a crucial concept in individual's ethnotheory.

It will be demonstrated now that the concept of responsibility was described by subjects at these structural level they have reached.

At stage II (psychological traits) responsibility is described by concrete chores and activities (caring for the children, helping other people etc.).

At stage IIIa (autonomous identity) responsibility is understood as the ethical relation between action and action consequences. Subjects attribute to the actor responsibility for the consequences of his/her action. By the way, this is also true for Western subjects, of course.

At stage IIIb, responsibility is defined through the consequences of one's action or others. Since every action includes consequences for others, responsibility becomes a general monitoring function for the individual's action. However, mainly significant others, i.e. members of the family or the community, are included in this relationship.

At stage IV, Western subjects perceive the relation between

personal action and action consequences again in a different way. Societal problems cannot be changed by individual actions alone but by a change of the system as a whole. On the other hand, everybody is responsible for the improvement or for maintenance of the whole system. Therefore, while the individual is not responsible for a failure of the system, he/she is responsible for removing or fighting against this failure.

Indonesian subjects feel responsible for society already at lower levels but in the sense of previously mentioned concrete duties toward public affairs. At stage IV, political or social organizations, such as they exist in school, in the village or in the city quarter, and in occupational life, are being claimed as essential for society. While at lower stages only the commitment to fulfil tasks in the organization is emphasized, now, at stage IV, the organization becomes one of the most important places where responsibility has to be taken.
Responsibility is also sometimes defined as holding and expressing one's own opinions even when they are opposed to the beliefs held by the government.

Distribution of stages among three cultures

Finally, some quantitative results shall be presented.
As is is to be seen in table 1, in each of the three cultures the higher stages (IIIa, IIIb and IV) were found. The distribution is different with some higher proportion of stage

IV in the U.S.A. and Germany; however, in Indonesia also this stage of societal identity is present.

table 1

Table 2 presents levels of thought corresponding to the stages IIIa to IV. Again, dialectical thinking is present in each of the three cultures with Indonesians showing lower frequencies in higher levels of thought.

table 2

Table 3 shows results fo two components of dialectical thinking: Perception (awareness) of contradiction which is the precondition of thinking and finding a solution - and the dialectical solution itself. The comparison between Indonesians and Germans show that Germans perform a higher proportion of dialectical solutions than Indonesians.

table 3

Concluding remarks

Results can be related to the distinction between independent and interdependent identity by Markus and Kitayama (1991). While the independent identity is mainly developed in Western culture, Indonesians clearly could be better characterized by

interdependent identity. It is defined primarily through the relations to others, while independent identity is defined through self-sufficient control of environment and separation from others. Both divisions, independent and interdependent identity as well as the five stages of identity, can be misleading. While a specific form of interdependent identity is realized in the conception of IIIb (mutual identity) and independent identity is to be found in stage IIIa (autonomous identity), the developmental approach of structural stage can combine them in an ideal way: Independent and dependent identities develop in the context of culture or domain and undergo qualitative structural changes. Those developmental changes can be described and explained best when we assume common structural stages of the conception of human being.

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Career dilemma						
USA		15,7	30,6	25,9	16,7	11,2
Indonesia		46,4	23,2	19,6	3,4	3,4
Germany	1,1	3,3	23,3	43,3	20	6,7
family-job dilemma						
USA		1,9	11	51,9	19,4	11,9
Germany	1,1	10	36,7	16,7	—	13,3

Tab. 1: Distribution of the stages of the concept of human nature in three cultures

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	Career dilemma					
	II–IIIa	IIIa	IIIa–IIIb	IIIb	IIIb–IV	IV
USA		14,8	32,4	31,5	14,8	6,5
Indonesia	1,8	32,1	23,2	30,4	7,1	7,1
Germany	3,3	20,7	13,8	44,8	6,9	10,5

IIIa is related to relativistic thought

IIIb is related to subjective dialectical thought

IV is related to objective dialectical thought

Stages in between indicate transitions of thinking styles

Tab. 2: Distribution of thinking styles in three cultures

		II-IIIa	IIIa	IIIa-IIIb	IIIb	IIIb-IV	IV
I	P		32,1	23,2	30,4	7,1	7,1
	S	1,8	50	30,4	12,5	5,4	
G	P	3,3		10	36,7	33,3	16,7
	S	3,3	20,7	13,8	44,8	6,9	10,3

IIIa is related to relativistic thought
IIIb is related to subjective dialectic thought
IV is related to objective dialectical thought

Stages in between indicate transitions of thinking processes

Table 3: Relativistic and dialectical thought of Indonesian (I) and German (G) subjects separated for perception (P) and solution (S) of dialectical problems